

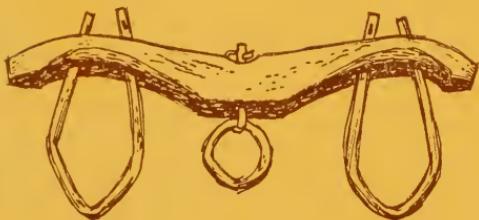
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Abraham Lincoln, Man of Politics

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN, MAN OF POLITICS

by

Dr. F. Gerald Ensley

Preached at

North Broadway Methodist Church
columbus, Ohio

February 10, 1946

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, MAN OF POLITICS

Tuesday is the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, and our theme this morning is "Abraham Lincoln, Man of Politics." For that describes him; he was a man of politics. He first ran for public office at the youthful age of 23, and when he died he was holder of the highest political position in the land. In between those extremes his consuming interest was politics. To be sure, he wasn't a professional politician; he made his living chiefly by the law. But politics was in his blood. He couldn't let it alone. He was forever aspiring to office or scheming to get his candidate in. Though beaten a number of times, he didn't quit until the people finally put him in the highest office in the land. Herndon speaks truly of the great President when he says, "Politics was his life."

Now it is no secret that some people look down on the politician. "He is just a politician", one person says of another, and the inference is that "politician" is just about a synonym for "shyster." And there is a widespread feeling that if we could do away with politicians the world would be just that much better off. There is a story going the rounds that a surgeon, an architect, and a politician were arguing as to which was the oldest profession. The surgeon was sure his was, because hadn't God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam before he had operated and taken out one of his ribs to make Eve. But the architect was sure he came before the ~~surgeon~~. He pointed out that the earth was created before Adam. God, the Supreme Architect of the Universe, had made the earth out of chaos. "Yes," replied the politician, not to be outdone, "and I made the chaos!"

And because the art of the politician is such a questionable one there are those who insist we ought never to talk about politics in church. "Stick to the Gospel," the preacher is told, "and don't mix in politics." After all, don't we have separation of Church and State in this country?

But such a jaundiced view of things is far from well-founded. Theoretically we separate religion and politics in this country, but in practice we never have. Whenever a

great political issue has raised its head the churches have always discussed it. Our Revolutionary forebearers preached independence in their churches; one of the shrines of the American Revolution is the Old South Meeting-house in Boston. Paul Revere, you remember, hung his lanterns to warn the countryside in the steeple of a church. The abolitionist movement before the Civil War was cradled in the congregational churches of the North. The first meeting of the Republican Party in 1856 was called to meet in a Congregational Church in Ripon, Wisconsin. The temperance movement which culminated in the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was cradled in the Methodist and Baptist Churches. And it's inevitable that churches should busy themselves with politics. We can't separate religion and politics, because we can't cut up people. The man who sits in the pew of the church is also a citizen of the state. He doesn't cease to be a citizen of the state when he enters his church; and he shouldn't cease to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God when he enters politics. We Christians, too, have got a lot at stake in politics. For there is no force in America with such possibilities for good or evil, with the exception of the home, as the State. From the time our parents got a license from a court to marry until the undertaker secures a permit for our burial, our destiny is shaped by the State. Not a day passes, scarcely an hour, but our concerns are touched by government. And if we are ever to build a better world it will include the Christianizing of our political life. We have a right, -- and a duty -- therefore to discuss it in a church.

History is humanity's great schoolmaster. We learn best what to do in the present by consulting the past. I'd like, therefore, to have us think today about Abraham Lincoln as a politician. We shall see from him that there are politicians, and politicians, and that the politician can be a noble servant of the common good as well as something less. And we can learn from him things that will be to our profit as we face the issue of these days. There are four characteristics of Abraham Lincoln as a man of politics which I'd like to have us dwell upon,

The first thing to be noted about him is that he combined an inflexible end with flexible means. One of his most distinguished biographers says of him that as to ways and means he was pliable, but as to principles he was a rock. The one aim of his Presidential career was to save the Union. That was his end. He maintained that the Union was indissoluble. And nobody could budge him on that point. He would not compromise. But when it came to the question of how the Union was to be saved, he was willing to go along with anyone who could do it. As he wrote to Horace Greeley, when the editor of the New York Tribune was trying to get him to emancipate the slaves, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that." Inflexible as to ends, flexible as to means!

While Lincoln was unyielding on principles he knew and used most of the tricks of the politician's trade. He handshaked the people who counted, kissed the babies, marched in torchlight processions, paid delegates' ways to a convention to vote for him, pulled wires to get office, and made appointments with a weather eye as to the votes it would get. He could be tactful with a Kentucky delegation, because he wanted to keep that Border State in the union. Yet, he could be "tough" with an Illinois delegation who wanted easement of the draft, because he knew his hold on Illinois was firm. He adjusted his method to fit the needs of the case. When he was up for re-election and the odds seemed against him, he knew how to win the votes he needed. He could let fall a hint here of political plums that would cause influential newspaper editors to come out for him. He could drop a cabinet officer there to appease another group. He could appoint Chase, a problem in the Cabinet, to the Supreme Court bench and thus keep his support. He could sidetrack Hannibal Hamlin from Maine and take Andrew Johnson from Tennessee as his running-mate, because he needed votes from that state and didn't need them in Republican Maine. And when the ballots were counted it was acknowledged that Lincoln had outwitted his enemies. Flexible as to means he was,

though holding firmly to his end of saving the Union.

It is worth noting in this connection that Lincoln looked on a political party as merely a means to an end. He never acted as though his own party were intrinsically sacred. He never treated opposing parties as though they were henchmen of the devil. When he came to appoint his Cabinet he had no hesitation about putting former Democrats in office, if he thought they were good men. When the call was given in 1866 for the Convention to nominate Lincoln for president the second time it is interesting to note that it did not mention the Republican party. It was called "The Union National Convention." Lincoln was a party man, because he thought parties were the most effective way on the whole of getting things done. But he never looked at a party as more than a tool. He gave as his advice in the stirring days of the 50s, "Stand with anybody that stands right. Stand with him while he is right, and part with him when he goes wrong." Inflexible as to ends, flexible as to means, - that was Lincoln.

The trouble with so many of us is that we are just the opposite of the great politician. We are often flexible as to ends, and inflexible as to methods. Do you ever have the feeling which I have sometimes these days that the nations are drifting? None of them, with the possible exception of Russia, seems to know just what it wants. So few of our statesmen seem to have a well-thought-out philosophy of government. Consequently, they have no fixed conception of where we should be going. On the other hand, how many people there are who, having no fixed end, are very inflexible as to means! They talk and act as though there was only one way to do things. They cling to their party, right or wrong, and vote the straight ticket every time, as though their party were something sacred, an end in itself. The late Senator George W. Norris, who in his early days was a liberal Republican, used to tell amusedly of a clergyman whom he once met in a small Nebraska town. Meeting Norris one day on the street, this particular person told the senator at great length how much he admired the record he was making in Washington. "Mr. Norris," he said, "I am so anxious to have

you succeed that every night on bended knees I ask God to guard and protect you and see that you are elected to the Senate in order that your activities may have a wider scope. Why, I get so enthusiastic that I almost feel as though I ought to vote for you myself!" "Well, my good friend," replied the Senator, "if that's the way you feel about it, why don't you vote for me?" "Oh, Mr. Norris," he answered, "I never could do that. I am a Democrat." That's the way so many of us are in our politics. We can learn something, I believe, from Abraham Lincoln. He was inflexible as to the end, flexible as to means, and he regarded a party as only a means.

In the second place, will you note that he maintained a wholesome balance between the rights of individual persons and the welfare of the people as a whole. Lincoln was an unblushing Jeffersonian in his outlook on government. The Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson penned, was his platform, his confession of faith. He was a firm believer in human rights, — the rights of men to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He believed in the right of property. Though he loathed slavery, he still supported the Fugitive Slave Law as long as it was on the books. The Southern slave-holder, he felt, had a legal right to his property. And he proposed that instead of depriving the South of her slaves without compensation that the Federal government should buy their freedom. He believed in the fundamental rights of the individual, and yet, when those rights stood in the way of the welfare of the people as a whole, he was not afraid to abrogate them. He suspended the writ of habeus corpus because secessionist agitators were doing their evil work behind it. He suppressed newspapers which sought to undermine the war effort. For months at a time he ruled as a benevolent dictator, without calling Congress into session, because he felt the public welfare demanded it. He finally emancipated the slave under his own construction of the President's war powers. And this suppression of human rights in the interest of the people as a whole brought him a great deal of abuse. He was hated, lampooned, and under continual attack. When Booth fell to the stage after assassinating Lincoln they say he cried, "Sic semper

tyrannis." "Ever may it be to tyrants." Lincoln combined a belief in the rights of persons with a feeling for the welfare of the people as a whole.

Now this question of individual rights versus social welfare is the greatest single problem of democracy. If social welfare is put first you get tyranny in the end. All the dreadful things the Nazis and Communists have done to individual men and women these last fifteen years they justified as being necessary to the welfare of the State. One has but to reflect on the awful things that have happened in Europe to realize what a bulwark we have in our American Bill of Rights. And yet, if individual rights are set up above social welfare you get anarchy. The thing that brought Hitler to the helm of Germany and sent deomcracy there to its doom was the fact that evil men were hiding behind their rights. There is no quicker way to bring Fascism to a country than to set up rights, particularly property rights, as absolute. The problem of democracy is to steer between the extremes of absolute individual rights and the absolute authority of the State. A few months ago, while the UNO meetings were being held in San Francisco word came that fifteen Poles who had set out in good faith for Russia to discuss the establishment of a recognized Polish government had disappeared. Nothing was heard of them. When the Russians were approached they said rather casually that they thought there were 16 Poles instead of 15. The reply is revealing and interesting. The Russians thought that the Poles under discussion were suspicious characters, and they couldn't see why Britain should get excited over 15 or 16 Poles. Yet, a little later Russia made a proposal which would eventually result in the independence of the masses in the dependent areas of the world, -- like India, for example. And the British turned that down. Britain gets excited about the rights of 15 or 16 individuals. Russia gets excited about the common welfare of the masses. What we must learn to do is to preserve a balance between the two. Individuals are important; you can't have a good society without free individuals. Russia has not seen that yet. Yet, when individual rights are made absolute, then the masses of the common people suffer. Many

Americans and British haven't seen that yet.

When Lincoln began his famous address at Gettysburg he said, "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Equal individual rights, -- that was what Lincoln was speaking of there. But he closed by uttering the hope that government of, by, and for the people should not perish from the earth. He was thinking there of the people as a whole. We must weave together in our common life the rights of the individual and of society in the same masterful manner that Lincoln did it at Gettysburg.

Note a third fact about Lincoln. He looked on himself as a servant of One greater than himself. Lincoln is not one of those politicians who just call on God on election day. His faith in a sovereign God was one of the presuppositions by which he lived. Lincoln had been reared on the Calvinistic teachings of the Baptist preachers of the frontier. In mid-life he attended the Presbyterian Church, where the same faith in the sovereignty of God was sounded Sunday after Sunday. And that faith breathes in his speeches. He believed that we are all of us, men and nations, in the hands of a God who determines our destiny. That God does with us what He will. Lincoln confessed that with all the power of the Presidency he was not able to control events. Rather, events, -- that is, God -- had controlled him. When he came to perhaps the greatest utterance of his career, -- the Second Inaugural address, -- he expressed the longing of his people for peace. No one, North or South, had wanted bloodshed. But, said Lincoln, the Almighty has his own purposes. God had willed to remove slavery and willed to do it by the blood-red path of war. We may pray for peace, yet, said Lincoln, "if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

The servant of an omnipotent God, -- that is the way Lincoln conceived of himself and his task as a man of politics.

And it was this deep faith in a high God that gave Lincoln much of his strength. Because he believed in God he could take himself out of the picture. After all, if God is going to win anyway, then everything doesn't depend on me. And I don't have to be afraid of what people say or do. For even if they turn me out of office, God's cause is going to win. Some time ago someone asked Stanley Baldwin why he didn't tell the British people the truth in 1935 that Germany was preparing for war. The whole course of things might have been different if he had. But Baldwin's answer was that he would have lost the election had he told the truth. That's human, isn't it? We want to guard our own successes. But while it may be human, it is self-centeredness like that which plays the devil with our political life. How different Lincoln was! He wanted to be re-elected in 1864. He did everything he could to win the election. Yet, as he openly said, "I am not indispensable." He didn't worry unduly as to his own failure or as to who might succeed him. He could face men without fear; he could look on facts as they were without blinking, - because he believed in a Power greater than himself, whose servant he was. Would that we could get that note back into our political life again!

Finally, let's note that Lincoln had an unyielding faith in the good will and good sense of the common man. Lincoln believed that the common man wants to do right. At heart human nature is good. It is interesting to note that democracies, where the people get a chance, become involved in fewer wars than dictatorships. Put it up to the common folks of the world whether there shall be peace or war, and they'll vote for peace every time. Lincoln believed that the common man has the good sense necessary to tell right from wrong. His instincts are sound. You may fool some of the people all the time. You may fool all of them some of the time. But you can't fool all of them all of the time. Lincoln believed to the bottom of his heart that you can put it up to the people, and they won't let you down. It was one of Lincoln's boasts that only once

in his life had he been beaten by a vote of the people.

But if common men are to decide right they have to be informed. They must know the facts and see what is at issue. And there was Lincoln's great strength. He had a wonderful faculty of making complex issues clear to the intelligence of ordinary people. Several years ago a man, writing in one of our Methodist publications, told of being taken by his father as a small boy to hear Lincoln speak in 1859. He didn't remember anything which Lincoln said, except one illustration which he used. Lincoln said that slavery was like a rattlesnake which a frontiersman found coiled up in a cabin bunk where his little child was sleeping. The problem was how to scotch the snake without harming the child; and that, said Lincoln, is the problem that faces the country, -- how to destroy slavery without destroying the nation. The illustration was so vivid that a small boy understood it and preserved it in his memory across 80 years.

Lincoln is regarded as one of the greatest masters of public opinion that ever held the Presidency. And his secret was that he took the common people of the country into his confidence. He didn't keep secrets from them. When something had to be done, -- even an unpopular thing, he put it right out so every one of them could understand why it was. He seldom made a move without explaining its purpose or outlining the whole background of events which forced the action. He would use a power right up to the limit but never without letting the people know why circumstances had demanded it be done for the public good. And he found that the people really relished the truth, that eventually they understood it, and when they understood it they sustained him.

Faith in the people was one of the pole stars by which Lincoln steered the Ship of State. All sovereignty, he thought, ultimately derives from them. All power is wielded fundamentally by them. And in the end all acts of government find their justification if they are for the people's good. A friend of mine says that he once quoted the closing

lines of the Gettysburg Address at a patriotic occasion. He quoted it as most of us do, "that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth." When it was over an old man came forward and told the speaker that he had quoted it wrong. My friend said that he thought he had given it correctly. "O", replied the old man, "you had the words right, but you put the accent in the wrong place. You see I was at Gettysburg that day, and I heard Lincoln give that speech. And he said it this way: "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Whether Lincoln said it just that way or not, the emphasis on "the people" was the accent of his life.

Well, it is these things we are talking about which Lincoln stood for which constitute the essence of democracy: The inflexible end of preserving the Union, combined with flexible political methods; a balance between the right of the individual and the welfare of society; belief in an Almighty God above all whose servants we are; and not least of all a faith in the common people. Let these things which moved Lincoln so strongly become our guiding-star and the future of America is safe. Let these high faiths become our faith, and we shall solve our problems, set our economic house in order, bind up the nation's wounds, care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan, and do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and all nations.

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